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Editorial: Exchanges are needed

Though it may not seem like it, the firestorm of controversy surrounding the state's Religious Freedom Restoration Act will not last forever. It eventually will die down and the larger conversation will once again move to another topic.

But there's another crisis that will continue to haunt Gov. Mike Pence and our state long after the national spotlight has moved on from RFRA: the HIV epidemic currently raging in southern Indiana. Our state reporter Maureen Hayden has been on top of this from the beginning.

"Every one of 55 newly confirmed cases of HIV in Scott County ... is linked to intravenous drug users who shared needles while injecting a highly addictive painkiller called Opana," she wrote in a column we published March 24.

Shea Van Hoy, editor of the News and Tribune of Jeffersonville and a former reporter for the Kokomo Tribune, shamed Pence and those who shared his opposition to needle exchanges.

"Critics of a needle exchange say implementation of such a program will promote drug use, but users willing to share dirty needles — some of whom

knowing the risk — often can't control their urges or dependency," he wrote. "They're going to inject drugs one way or another, so the state must allow local officials to set up an exchange for those with such addictions."

Pence subsequently capitulated, declared a public health emergency and allowed an emergency needle exchange program. But he remained stubbornly opposed to the idea of expanding the program, proposed by Republican Public Health Committee chairman, Rep. Ed Clere of New Albany.

"Half of Indiana's 92 counties, now at risk for an HIV outbreak like the one that's hit Scott County, could launch emergency programs that give needles to drug users under a measure advancing in the Indiana House," Hayden reported Tuesday. "But the proposal, billed as a pro-active measure to curb the spread of the virus that causes AIDS, faces a veto threat from Pence."

This is frustrating beyond words. Perhaps if we had needle exchanges in the state to begin with, an emergency measure wouldn't need to be passed. And while we applaud the governor for finally allowing some exchanges, he apparently doesn't understand the magnitude of the crisis and still opposes them statewide.

Sunday, we will dedicate our entire front page to the 25th anniversary of Ryan White's death. While much has changed in the quarter-century since

then, we must ask ourselves if ignorance hasn't reared its ugly head once again in our state.